The state of technology's art: It's saving time

Marriage of phone, computer creates an electric Yellow Pages

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Suppose you have a craving for Chinese food, specifically Cantonese, but you have to find a restaurant in a hurry because your flight is leaving Los Angeles International Airport in two hours.
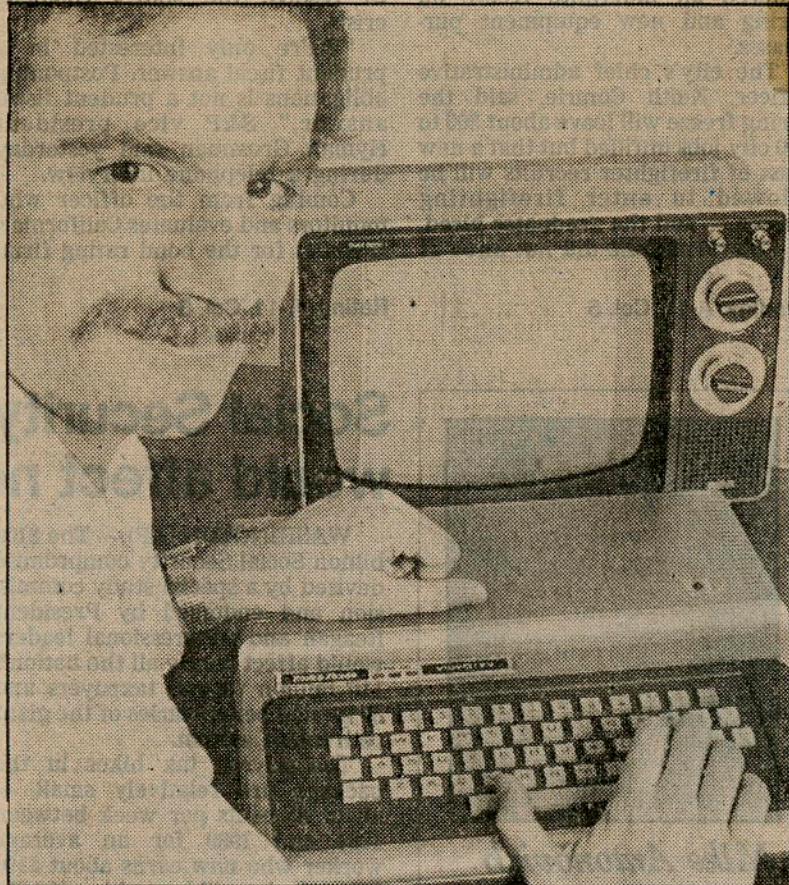
If you have a computer handy, instead of searching in a phone book you can hook up with BUY-PHONE, a computerized video-text system designed to help consumers find the nearest sources of goods, services and entertainment.

The system gives people with computers — at home or at work — access to a listing of more than 10,000 retail businesses in the West Los Angeles area, said David Lappen, vice president of BUY-PHONE.

"Anything you can think of or want should be listed," Lappen said. "If it's not, that's only because a retailer hasn't thought that it's important enough to advertise."

Using a computer, a telephone and a "modem" connecting the two, consumers can find listings for anything from auto repair to African tribal robes, for free.

Lappen explained that a person with the proper equipment can gain access to the information by dialing 474-0270. The user will hear a sharp dial tone, which means the connection to BUY-PHONE's main system has been made.

The consumer then selects from about a dozen geographical areas within the area bounded by Western Avenue, the ocean, Mulholland Drive and LAX.

The computer saves times by quickly scanning its listings for

David Lappen demonstrates how his electric phone book works.

Computer

the item the consumer wants and arranges those listings from the nearest to the farthest geographically from the consumer, Lappen said.

"The main difference between this system and the phone book is that it trys to conform to your structure, whereas you have to comform with the Yellow Pages' structure," Lappen said, explaining that the phone book often does not list specific items by name but only by general category.

"It (the system) is instant, direct information so you don't have to look at something you don't want to see."

Lappen, a 26-year-old electrical engineer, said BUY-PHONE is the first system of its kind in the United States. The French government is experimenting with a similar system.

BUY-PHONE is unique among video-text services in that it is free. Businesses and individual sellers pay $50 a year to be in the listings, Lappen said.

There are existing videotext systems, Lappen said, that charge the user up to $50 an hour.

"If you have an account with a service, there's a person behind the computer who can find out all kinds of information about you, and that creates problems," he said.

"If we know you were looking at restaurant listings, you might be afraid someone's going to come and knock off your house while you're at dinner."

Lappen said it is important that those who run BUY-PHONE know nothing about the users, because then people will feel comfortable asking about anything and playing around with the system.

"In a way we're educating the public, starting to answer the question, 'What can computers do for me?'" Lappen said.

The system has been available to users since November, and Lappen estimated that 30,000 to 40,000 people in the West Los Angeles area currently have access to it.

Lappen said most home computers are equipped to use the system, adding that the phone connection device can be purchased for approximately $150 at any computer store.

The idea for the system started about a year and a half ago. Before the public was given access to BUY-PHONE, the system was tested by a few experienced hobbyists who found very few bugs, Lappen said.

Retailers can update information on a daily basis, allowing them to list sales and special events.

This ability to change information is especially useful to theaters, which often switch programs daily, Lappen said.

BUY-PHONE, located in Westwood, cross-indexes all its listings, so that movies, for example, can be found by their titles or theater name.

The system also has begun listing movie reviews, where users rate the films they see.

Lappen said he hopes BUY-PHONE will soon have units in hotels, giving visitors an information source.

"We want to put them in public locations, such as libraries and shopping centers, so people can go up to it, feel comfortable with it and play with it," Lappen said.

"Information technology is going to be very important, but it can only be useful if a large number of people have access."